

The Ordinary Times of Life



Stories for personal reflection
and group conversation

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Stories for Personal Reflection
and Group Conversations.

by Ranjini Wickramaratne-Rebera

The Ordinary Times of Life- stories for personal reflection and conversation
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Foreword

The world today is experienced by many as being less settled, more disrupted and the social nuances once taken for granted are shifting and changing. The Christian Church through the ages has at such points in history turned its attention back to the scriptures and re-told texts through story, midrash and re-interpretation of the encounter with the Holy at these points of dislocation.

So often these texts are of stories long forgotten, or individuals within the story overlooked and ignored. It is here that story-tellers like Ranjini Wickramaratne-Rebera find their prophetic voice. Ranjini tells the stories of women and men, long forgotten in some cases, and allows us to hear afresh their voice speaking to us in modern tones across the ages. This new voice speaks the world into life and resonates with those who would explore faith and spirituality in the context of this present age.

The Christian faith has long practised rhythms and practices of life as a way of being, in contrast to being consumed by doing; things like regular prayer, fasting and feasting, serving and offering hospitality to their wider community. Prominent among those practices is the study of Christian Scripture.

I hope that this collection of bible studies opens for you individually or in small groups a place to hear clearly God's voice of invitation to life. May it be a place to wrestle with what it means to be people of faith and to explore the spiritual practice of reading the Christian Scriptures in a world that experiences dislocation.

Shalom



Lay Pastor Geoff Wellington
Presbytery Minister: Congregation Futures
Canberra Region Presbytery
Uniting Church in Australia

Preface

Each day brings its own rhythms and questions. Sometimes the day passes in a predictable manner. Sometimes the unexpected intrudes into a well-ordered day. Unforeseen personal events, unpredictable events, news of global disasters can disrupt the rhythms of life.

Perhaps there are times when we question our faith in God or look for answers in the Bible. We may turn to prayer or listen to a favourite piece of music while we wait for the ordinary rhythms of life to return. The stories and reflections in this book are offered for use during such times. They are stories from ancient times that can remind us that the predictable and the unpredictable can occur no matter where life takes us.

The ten Reflections centre around women and men in the biblical narrative. The stories from the Old Testament speak of times when lives become tangled with demands in relationships. In times of conflict God is silent or sometimes God is the voice of authority and power.

The stories from the New Testament tell of women and men who encounter Jesus as healer and teacher. There are conversations that lead to the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God.

The reflections have been created as stories that go beyond the written text. The creative style for retelling episodes read into the silences that surround the people and the events that occur in their lives. I am indebted to a hermeneutic created by Dr. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza that invites readers to go beyond the written text, to ask questions and most importantly, to let God speak through the words and the silences.

Each reflection is for personal use or for the use of groups as Bible conversations. The times for pausing and reflecting are times for the reader to use for their own moments of quietness.

The undertaking to write these series of reflections came as a response to a request from Geoffrey Wellington, Presbytery Minister in the Canberra Region Presbytery, The Uniting Church in Australia. Thank you for the challenge and the trust placed in my skills as a writer and a storyteller.

I also extend my deep appreciation and thanks for the support and encouragement I receive from the following people.

Mark Faulkner who convinced me to pick up my creative writing skills after I retired.

Basil Rebera, my husband and Bible scholar, who makes sure my creative storytelling stays true to the biblical narrative.

Margaret Reeson, writer, critic and friend, who encourages me to be myself and “tell it like it is!”

Carolyn McAllister, editor of *Perspective* for her patience and quick responses to my numerous emails.

Bill Lang for his advice and work on book design and publishing.

Finally, my thanks to Mark Faulkner for his cover illustration that reflects the numerous moments of each ordinary day, and the times when the unexpected breaks through such moments.

It is my hope that the words on the page will touch you and evoke a response that is personal as well as challenging for the ordinary times of Life.

Ranjini

Ranjini Wickramaratne-Rebera

Gungahlin Uniting Church and Community Centre

Faith in God's Promises

Sarah, Hagar and Abraham

Texts: Genesis chapters. 12:16 - 18:15; 20 - 21:20.

The Book of Genesis is a narrative that records the history of the Hebrew people. It begins with the creation narratives, the birth of humanity, consequences of disobedience to God and God's covenant through Noah and his descendants. Abraham is a descendant of Noah. The story of Abraham and Sarah, his wife, is an ancestral story through which God's promises are fulfilled. Faith and hope in God's promises sustain Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave, through the twists and turns of the story.

God's promises to Abraham, Sarah and Hagar.

God promised Abraham to 'make of you a great nation.' (12:3). But Sarah was barren. There was no hope of descendants to perpetuate the family line. God promised Sarah a son in her old age. God also protected Sarah when Abraham protected himself by passing her off as his sister. God promised Hagar to protect her and her son when they were banished from the household of Abraham.

Retelling their story: What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Sarah reflects. My life was not easy. I survived long journeys with my husband Abraham. I survived our time in Egypt when he gave me to Pharaoh saying I was his sister (12:11-13). After Pharaoh discovered the deception he gave me back to my husband. We left Egypt and continued our journey.

There came the day when I heard God speaking to Abraham and asking him not to be afraid. That he would be great one day. As happens often, I heard Abraham complaining that I was barren and that he had no children. However God reminded him of the promises that were made and the protection that would be given to us till we reached the land promised to us. (15:1-6). After the required ritual sacrifice Abraham fell asleep. He told me later that he had heard God's voice repeating earlier promises. God then made a covenant with Abraham that would last for generations to come (15:7-21).

However Abraham continued to lament that I was barren. I decided to take control. As was the accepted custom among my people, I offered him my slave woman Hagar. She would sleep with him and become pregnant. The child would be ours. The plan was set in motion and Hagar became pregnant (16:1-4),

Hagar reflects: *I was shocked. I was a slave to my mistress Sarah and had never spoken with her husband. Now she sends me – not asks me – to sleep with him and become pregnant. Why? So she can own the child as hers? So the child will fulfil a promise made by God? And she says it must be a son. A son? What certainty is there that the child won't be a daughter? For that matter what certainty is there that I would become pregnant?*

Sarah reflects: *I watched Hagar's pregnancy grow. She looked at me with contempt. It was believed that barrenness was a result of previous sins. I was alone. My husband was silent. I grew angrier with each day. I would put Hagar to work at tasks that were difficult. I would shout at her. There were times when I would be physically violent towards her. I had changed. So had she. We were not the same two women who came out of Egypt many years ago. I took control. I gave my husband an ultimatum. I accused him of being the cause of my suffering. I called on God to be the judge between my husband and me. My husband gave me power over the slave-girl Hagar. I drove her out of our house (16:1-6).*

PAUSE. Reflect on the relationship between Sarah and Hagar.

Are there similarities to surrogacy that is an accepted practice today?

How do we respond to the 'Hagars' of today? Women who have suffered rejection, pregnant young women alone, homeless persons, refugees, and those who are struggling to survive?

Hagar reflects. *I ran. I didn't know where to go. My instinct was to run to my home in Egypt. As I ran I saw a well in the distance. An angel of the Lord found me near the well and spoke to me by name, "Where have you come from and where are you going?". "I am running away from my mistress Sarah." The Angel said, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." (16:8-9) I was speechless. Why would I want to return to work for a woman who has been violent towards me? What would happen to my baby? Then I heard the voice say that I have conceived a son and that I should name him Ishmael. Had I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him? I named the well 'Beer-lahai-roi' after the name I gave to God (16:10-16). As God had instructed, I returned*

to the household of Abraham and Sarah. Once again I suffered much violence from Sarah as I waited for my son to be born. I could see that it was jealousy that drove her to violence. Perhaps I provoked her by looking at her with contempt. After all she was barren and I was not. I had expected Abraham as the father of my child to protect me from his wife. But he stayed silent. So I clung to the promise that God had given me at the well. Finally my son was born and I named him Ishmael.

PAUSE. Reflect on similarities in violent relationships in our society.

How likely is it that we would stay silent like Abraham?

How do we respond to violence arising from cultural, ethnic, religious or political ideology?

Sarah reflects: *One day when my husband was 99 years old, I heard him laughing loudly. When questioned, he replied that God had spoken and promised that I would have a child. I laughed loudly too. Yet God gave me a name for the child although I was still barren. He was to be named Isaac. God then asked me why I had laughed and didn't I believe that I would have a son. Because I was afraid I denied that I had laughed. "Oh yes you did laugh," was God's reply. (18:9-15)*

Hagar reflects: *My son Ishmael was 13 years old when God made another covenant with Abraham. I heard that God had promised to make him the 'ancestor of a multitude of nations' (17: 4). As a fulfilment of this covenant Abraham circumcised Ishmael and all the males in our household. Sarah was now 90 years old. I didn't believe that she would ever become pregnant.*

Sarah reflects: *Our travels continued. I often wondered if God's promise would really come true. While living in Gerar, once again Abraham referred to me as his sister and gave me to King Abimelech. Thankfully God saved me by revealing to the King that I was not Abraham's sister. King Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of that you did this thing?". The King gave me back to Abraham together with silver and land in which to settle. It was in Gerar that I became pregnant and that Isaac was born and named. God had promised us a son. Joy and laughter returned to our household (20. 21:7). As Isaac grew I watched him play with Ishmael. The two boys were growing close. Once again fear grew within me. I resented the friendship between my son and the son of the slave woman. I confronted Abraham and insisted that the slave woman and her son be sent away. Our inheritance would never be shared with Ishmael. We acted together and sent Hagar and her son away, never ever to return to our household.*

Hagar reflects: *Once again we were alone and afraid. We had little water and food as we wandered through the desert wilderness. I watched my son grow closer to death when a messenger appeared before us. I pleaded that my child should not die. God heard my pleading and the messenger asked, "What troubles you Hagar? Do not be afraid. Come, lift up the boy and hold him. I will make a great nation of him." I believed that it was God who was speaking to me again. I saw the well of water. I gave Ishmael a drink. (21:8-21). We continued our journey knowing that God would keep the promise to care for us.*

PAUSE. Reflect. The relationships between Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and the two boys would have worked out as: Abraham-Sarah-Isaac. Abraham-Hagar-Ishmael. Isaac-Ishmael. Sarah-Hagar.

Are there different family structures today reflected in the household of Abraham?

REFLECTION

Genesis chapter 22 onwards, records the continuing story of Abraham and his household. The family of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and their relationships are no longer central to the story. Sarah dies aged 127 years and is believed to be buried in Hebron. (Gen. 23:2). Abraham dies aged 175 years. He is buried in Beersheba. It was the last time that Isaac and Ishmael came together when they arrived to bury their father (Gen. 25:7).

Has the word 'promise' and its implications changed today? What is implied when we make promises within relationships? Or when we say "God promised to heal me"? Do we expect God to fulfil promises according to our requests?

Does faith guarantee the fulfilment of God's promises?

Does our faith strengthen us when WE make promises to God?

God of unbroken promises,
give me the wisdom to discern your promises to me.

Family Honour

Dinah and her brothers.

Text: Genesis 34.

The Israelite Patriarch Jacob, his wives and children and his livestock arrived in Shechem in Canaan. Shechem was a large city with fertile land and a network of roads. Jacob and his family camped by the city. It was a territory with which he was familiar (33:18-20).

Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah, together with their maids occupied tents which were designated for women. Leah had six sons until she gave birth to a daughter, who was named Dinah. The narrative reads that Dinah used to visit 'women of the region' (34:1). During one such visit Shechem, prince of the region, saw her, seized her and lay with her by force (34:2). He raped Dinah.

Who was Dinah? The segregation of women was accepted in ancient societies. Dinah would have been nurtured and protected by her mother, her aunt Rachel and the women who were included in women's households. The narrative informs the reader that Dinah had freedom to visit women in the region. It is possible to assume that such freedom would have had boundaries attached. Dinah would have been schooled in the importance of family honour. She would have learned the significance of protecting herself from shameful behaviour and protecting her sexuality as a virgin.

Re-telling Dinah's story: What follows is a re-telling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Dinah reflects: I feel as if I am invisible in my family of brothers. I was incidental to the rape I was subjected to by Shechem. I was not questioned or consulted by my brothers when they decided to defend the honour of my family. My father Jacob stayed silent.

I will now find the words to share my story. I loved the countryside and would go into the city of Shechem to visit with my women friends. I had always felt safe during such visits. I was not prepared for the moment when Prince Shechem saw me. I refused to go with him when he tried to talk me into going with him. In his anger he seized me and took me forcibly into his quarters (34:2). To this day I cannot shut out what happened. He raped me. I felt unclean and ashamed. As the days passed I was surprised to hear

Shechem talk gently to me and say that his soul was drawn to me (34:3). He then informed me that he had spoken to his father, Hamor, and requested that a marriage be arranged between us (34: 3-4).

I heard later that when my father and Hamor were talking, my brothers who had been working in the fields had returned. They had been furious when they heard of the rape and the proposal that was being discussed. My brothers had insisted that an outrage had been committed against Israel. (34:5-7). Neither my brothers nor my father talked to me about the rape nor what my wishes were regarding marrying Shechem. My rape was an excuse for defending the family honour and the honour of Israel.

PAUSE. Reflect:

The perpetrator of the violence, Shechem, falls in love with the victim, Dinah, and wishes to marry her. Would people in such situations receive support today?

Word reached me that my brothers continued to be angry. Hamor, Shechem's father, had spoken of the benefits of an intercultural marriage should I be permitted to marry his son. Shechem had promised that he would be prepared to pay whatever my brothers desired so that I could be his wife (34: 8-12). The bargaining had gone on. I was an invisible bargaining chip for my brothers. They desired vengeance and power. They claimed that Shechem was not circumcised and therefore he could not marry me. However if every male in the city of Shechem were to be circumcised, they would consent to our marriage (34:13-17).

My brothers' crafty plan worked. Hamor and Shechem returned and persuaded the males in the city to be circumcised. They claimed that the Israelites were friendly people and that there would be benefits from the transaction for an intercultural marriage. The males were circumcised.

PAUSE. Reflect.

In multicultural Australia how much is known about arranged marriages?

What support is given to marriages between migrant and Anglo-Australians (the outsider and the insider) or between persons of different faiths?

Two days passed after the men were circumcised. I hoped my family would honour their promises. I was wrong. My brothers Simeon and Levi had taken swords and crept silently into the Shechem . They had then killed all the males. They had crept into the

homes of Hamor and Shechem and killed them too. Then I heard them outside my door. They grabbed me and took me back to my mother's house (34: 25-26). I felt that I was an object to be carried off like a trophy, rather than a sister who had been violated.

My other brothers had then gone into the city, plundered it and taken away women, children and whatever wealth they could find (34:27-29). I sometimes wonder what happened to those women and children. Were they now like refugees, with no security or sanctuary in a foreign land? My father, Jacob, had been angry with Simeon and Levi when they returned after their violent actions. Jacob had reminded them that they had brought disgrace on our family and community; that should the Canaanites come to avenge the deaths and destruction, there would be little he could do to protect our family or our household. We would be destroyed. Instead of asking for forgiveness, Simeon and Levi had replied, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (34:30-31).

They justified their violent actions by naming me a whore. A label that was used to identify a prostitute. I was no longer a victim of violence. I was named a prostitute. I ask myself as to what honour there was in the actions of my brothers or in their treatment of me. And through it all I had no voice – until this moment.

REFLECTION

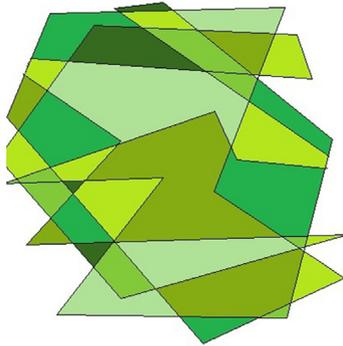
The rape of Dinah reads like a minor detour in the life of the patriarch Jacob. Obligation to community, family honour, shame and dishonour, violent actions are used to legitimise the use of Dinah as the reason for seeking vengeance and power. Justifying the righting of a wrong through the use of violence is a theme that runs through the story. The silence of Jacob when he learns of the predicament of his daughter, his willingness to meet Hamor half way and bring the two communities together in an act of understanding, demonstrates his faithfulness to God. His confrontation with his sons and the consequences of their brutality towards the neighbouring Canaanites closes this disturbing episode.

God's presence is not visible in this story. It is not a story that is read in church or used as the focus of a sermon. Yet it is a story that reminds the reader of the culture of violence that is evident at global, communal and personal levels today.

Are victims of rape and family violence assured of justice through our courts and law? The question is heard sometimes, "Why doesn't God do something?"

What answers are offered by communities of faith, organisations for peace or leaders of nation states?

Is it possible that God continues to work through the lives of those whose voices are drowned by the culture of violence and power?



God of hope and healing
walk with me when my days get fagmented

Courage and Risk

Rahab

Text: The Book of Joshua 2:1-24; 6: 22-25

The Book of Joshua is the sixth Book in the Old Testament. It begins with the words 'After the death of Moses'. Joshua the son of Nun was a military leader who had worked closely with Moses. After the death of Moses Yahweh commissioned him to succeed Moses. Under Joshua's command the land that belonged to the Canaanites beyond the river Jordan was conquered (1:1-16). The conquered land was divided and later occupied by the 12 tribes of Israel.

Who was Rahab?

Rahab was a Canaanite woman who lived in her father's house which was situated in the Wall of Jericho that surrounded the city. She supported her extended family who lived with her. Rahab earned her living as a prostitute to provide for her mother, sisters and other family members. Her work would have kept the family out of debt. As a prostitute she would have met Israelite and Canaanite men. She would have had conversations that gave her information into the political and social events that occurred in Israelite society. It is possible that she knew who Joshua was and that he had plans to invade her country.

Re-telling Rahab's story: What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Rahab reflects: *It was late one evening when two men knocked on my door. I recognised them as Israelites though I hadn't met them before. I was uncertain when they said that they wanted to spend the night with me (2:1). My neighbours who also had houses inside the City wall like I did, would have seen the two men and realised that they were Israelites from their appearance. I took them in since I didn't wish to leave them standing outside my door. It didn't take long for someone to inform the authorities that I had two Israelite men in my home. The King of Jericho then sent men to my house looking for the two men. They shouted that I was harbouring spies and that I should bring them out. I was not intimidated by them. While they were still outside*

I hid the two Israelite spies by taking them to the roof of my house and hiding them under stalks of flax. I returned to the King's men and convinced them that two men had come by but that I didn't know who they were. I said that it was nearly time to close the City gate and that they should leave. I urged them to go after the two men quickly so that they could be overtaken. Thankfully they believed me and went on their way towards the Jordan river (2:3-7).

PAUSE, Reflect:

Rahab, the prostitute, took a risk when she protected the two spies.

Rahab, the carer, earned sufficient money to keep her family safe and free from debt.

Would we judge or relate to women like Rahab who are forced to earn a living as she did to survive or support family?

I returned to the roof where the spies were hiding. As we talked I shared what I knew of the history of Israel. I had learned a lot from the men who had become my clients. I talked of Moses and the safe path that the Lord had made through the Sea of Reeds for his people to flee from Egypt. I talked of the fear we had felt when news reached us that their people had killed two Kings of the Amorites. I then talked about my faith in the Lord who was their God; that I believed that the Lord God was God of heaven and earth (2: 8-11). As we talked I wondered if I was taking a risk in trying to make them believe that, though I was a Canaanite, I knew that the Lord God could be trusted in times of danger.

I took a risk again. I asked the spies to swear that they would deal kindly with me and my family when they invaded our land. I asked for a sign of good faith that we would be spared and be safe. The two men agreed to my request. They promised to deal kindly and faithfully with us when the Lord gave them victory over our land (2:12-14). Once we had negotiated their release I agreed to let them down with a red rope tied to a window. I urged them to run towards the hills and hide for three days so the King's men would not find them. They replied that should I betray them they would be released from the oath we had taken. They asked me to tie the red rope I was using to the window. They said that all my family should be in the house with me. If any of them were on the street when the Israelites came into the City, the oath would be broken and all of us would be killed. I remember the words I said to them, "According to your words, so be it." Then I tied the red rope to the window and let them escape (2:15-21).

Many years have passed since I helped the two Israelite spies to escape. I and my family are settled safely in a new home in Israel. The two spies had informed Joshua about us and the help we had given them. Joshua's armed invasion had been brutal. The wall of Jericho was destroyed. The red ribbon I had tied to our window kept us safe when the City was destroyed and all its people killed. (6:22-24).

REFLECTION:

Rahab's words of faith in God and the risks she took played a significant part in Joshua winning the war against the Canaanites. She was an independent woman of courage who protected her family from the violence of war. She was the outsider: as a prostitute, a woman, and a non-Israelite. Rahab is mentioned three times in the New Testament: in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:1-16. Hebrews 11:31. James 2:25.

Wars are fought across the world today. Chemical weapons, drones, men and women armed with high-powered weapons spread destruction and death. Cities are destroyed. Ideology, politics and power have become the invisible weapons of war from which there is often no escape for victims.

The human cost of war includes families trapped in war zones as much as those families left behind to wait and watch.

*Give me the courage, God,
to take risks when needed and to confront violence without fear.*

Faithfulness

Naomi, Ruth and Boaz

Text: The Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth has been placed between the Book of Judges and the Books of Samuel in the Old Testament. The period between the 12th and 10th centuries BCE was a time of great lawlessness. There was no monarchy. Judges or leaders sprang up from among the people to maintain law and order within the community. The story of Ruth begins with a reference to this period and ends with a reference to the established monarchy of David.

God's voice is not heard throughout the Book. Nor does God intervene in any of the events. Yet the presence of God permeates the whole story. The faithfulness of God and the faithfulness between those in the story are important to the resolution of events in the story.

Who were Naomi, Ruth and Boaz?

Scholars now attribute the original story to be one used by professional story-tellers in Israel. It is probable that a story-teller resembling Naomi used this story to illustrate the preservation of family while including a foreigner within family. The final verses in the Book refer to Ruth as becoming an ancestor of King David. There is no evidence to show that she became a citizen of Israel once she married Boaz. Her name is included in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5-6).

Retelling the story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz: What follows is a retelling based on the Biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Naomi reflects:

I was happy living in Bethlehem with my husband, Elimelech, from the tribe of Ephrath, and our two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. However when famine gripped our land, Elimelech decided that we would move to another country where there would be food and work. When he said that we were going to Moab I couldn't believe it! How could he forget that Moab was the land of our enemy? They hated us and we hated them.

Why, even the teaching of the Law says clearly that "... no Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation..."(Deuteronomy 23:3). So why were we trying to seek asylum in a land that would be hostile to us? I followed my husband into this foreign land with a great deal of anxiety.

Surprisingly, we began to settle down. My husband died and I was left to care for my two sons. I realized that I was losing my identity, since I could no longer be called the wife of Elimelech. Now I had no name. Most people referred to me as 'the woman' (1: 1-5) It wasn't long before my sons decided to marry two Moabite girls: Ruth and Orpah.

Tragedy struck again! Mahlon and Chilion died. Neither Orpah nor Ruth had produced sons. In my culture a woman derived her identity through her father, her husband or her son. And here we were – three widows and not a male in the family. Those were dark days. I grew bitter and angry with YHWH my God. We came here as a family and now I was left with nothing because God did not give me any grandsons. I grieved and grew bitter with each passing day. Then I heard that the famine had ended and decided to return to my place of birth – Bethlehem.

I advised Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers' houses. Both girls refused to leave me. As we walked, I tried again to convince them to return to their mothers' houses. I called on my God to bless them and reward them for their kindness, faithfulness and caring for my family. There was nothing more I could give them. Still they continued to stay by me. But I persisted till Orpah finally gave in. She turned and walked back to Moab, while Ruth continued to cling to me. As I watched Orpah leave I remember praying that God would be kinder to her than he had been to me. (1:7-14).

Now I was left with Ruth: loyal, courageous, beautiful and stubborn! I tried again to convince her to return to her home. Instead she made a declaration of loyalty to me that left me speechless. It was a commitment made by one woman to another, one widow to another, a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law. She pleaded with me not to reject her. When she pledged that my people would be her people, did she realize how hard it would be for my people to accept a woman from a hostile ethnic community? When she pledged loyalty to my God, did she realize that no Moabite was permitted to enter our place of worship? When she claimed that she would be buried where I was buried, did she believe that she would stay with me till I died? More importantly what would the people of Bethlehem think of me when I returned with a woman from Moab at my side? (1: 15-18).

PAUSE. Reflect on Naomi's bitterness towards God.

Can you identify with her feelings?

Reflect on Ruth and Orpah's faithfulness to Naomi.

How important is faithfulness in personal and community relationships in a church?

My worst fears were realized when we arrived at the gates into Bethlehem. A group of people were gathered there and no one recognized me. Finally a few women asked "Is this Naomi?" With bitterness I replied, "Call me Naomi no longer. Call me Mara for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full but the LORD has brought me back empty." [1:20]. No one had spoken to Ruth. No one asked who she was. She was ignored almost as though she were invisible.

Life settled down after that. Ruth and I made a home together. Ruth surprised me again by deciding to be the wage earner for us. A foreigner with no skills, no status in our community and yet she decided to take control of our situation. Since I had a good idea as to who the landowners were, I suggested that she try to get work in the fields that belonged to a man named Boaz. The choice of Boaz had other implications for us. He was a relative of my dead husband and I hoped that maybe he would notice Ruth and realize that she was my daughter-in-law. (Ch. 2).

Ruth behaved well. She stayed with the women in the field until Boaz noticed her. The reapers identified her as Ruth the Moabite who had returned with Naomi, the wife of Elimelech. Again Ruth was identified as the outsider. Perhaps it was the family connection that led to Boaz being kind to her and making sure that she was protected from the young men working in the field. When Ruth had thanked him for his kindness to her, he had said that he honoured her for the care and kindness she had shown to me and for leaving her parents and her land of birth to find protection from the God of Israel. (ch. 2). At the end of the day Ruth brought home a large quantity of grain left over in the field.

When Ruth shared the day's events with me, I knew I had made the right decision to send her to the fields of Boaz. I explained to her then that Boaz was my next of kin – the closest relative I had from my husband's family. The next step was to devise a plan to draw Boaz's attention to the obligation he had to me as a widow of Elimelech. I was pleased when Ruth responded positively to my plan to find a way to seduce Boaz! Ruth followed my instructions. (3:1-5). She put on her best clothes and anointed herself and set off for the threshing floor in Boaz' field. I had instructed her to wait till he had finished his evening meal and was lying down to sleep. Then she was to uncover his feet and lie down by him.

I found it hard to sleep that night. I felt that the greatest risk would be when Boaz found Ruth lying at his feet. He could reject her for two reasons: one, because of her foreign status and two, because there was another man who was a closer relative to us than Boaz. However Ruth was wise. When he had become aware of the presence of a young woman at his feet, he had asked, "Who are you?". She had replied, "I am Ruth, your servant. I am your next of kin" (3:9). Boaz did not reject Ruth. He accepted her for who she was. She spent the night with him and in the morning slipped away before the workers arrived at the field. Boaz made sure she had more food to bring home to me.

I heard Ruth's footsteps outside our door even before she knocked. I remember calling out, "Who are you, my daughter?". I needed to know quickly if the plan had worked. Was she still my daughter or was she going to be the wife of Boaz?

PAUSE. Reflect: Was Naomi justified in using Ruth and her sexuality as a means to find security for herself and Ruth?

Everything fell into place as Boaz acted quickly. He met with the other near-relative in the presence of ten elders. After discussion and negotiation, Boaz was given the right to be our 'redeemer'. (ch. 4). He now had the right to take care of us because he was now the owner of all the property that belonged to my dead husband and my two dead sons. The elders who were present then blessed Boaz and asked that the LORD bless Ruth so that she may have children who would bring a blessing to the tribe of Ephrath.

Finally God was being good to me! We had a protector who would care for us. God then gave Ruth and Boaz a son. What a day of celebration that was! I was so proud of Ruth, who had walked with me from a time of grief and sorrow to a time of security and joy. As we celebrated the birth of my grandson, the women of Bethlehem came together to name the child. They named him Obed. Then, they came to me and placed Obed in my arms and declared that a son was born to me - Naomi! (4:13ff) For a minute I thought they had made a mistake. Obed was Ruth's son, not mine. But they did acknowledge Ruth when they blessed her for being of more value than seven sons.(4: 7-17).

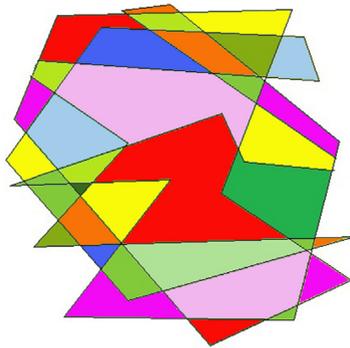
As I listened to the women, I realised that through all these events, God was also being vindicated. I had come back home blaming God for my predicament. But God had been faithful to me. God had never intervened openly during my long journey. God had not spoken directly to me, as he had done to many of my ancestors. But now God's name was finally vindicated. What more could I ask for?

REFLECTION

Is this a “woman’s book”, or is it a story of the survival of two women in a patriarchal family line? It was Boaz and the male elders who gave Ruth the legitimacy to claim her place in the history of Israel.

Reflect on times when you become aware of God’s faithfulness, especially if initially you may not have been aware of God’s presence.

Should we share stories of God’s faithfulness with migrants, refugees, the homeless, the poor, and those who feel that they are the outsiders in our society?



When my day gets fragmented, God,
may I see you in the colours of each day that speak to me
of your faithful presence.

Authority and Power

Esther and Mordecai

Text: The Book of Esther

The story of Esther is set in the Persian capital Susa around 486-465 BCE. During the reign of King Ahasuerus. The book is recognised as a work of fiction written by an unknown Jew. It reads like a novel where a beautiful orphan girl rises from obscurity to power. In many ways this is a secular book. God is a sensed presence in the story. The celebration of the Festival of Purim is the reason for the inclusion of the Book in the Old Testament.

The book of Esther follows the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament which record the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon. The rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple takes place during this period. Jews were a captive minority in the Persian kingdom.

Who were Esther and Mordicai?

No historical evidence has been found for Esther and Mordecai and their roles in the court of King Ahasuerus. The narrative states that Mordecai was a Jew who was the son of Jair and that his ancestry takes him back to the time of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Esther was the cousin of Mordecai. She was adopted by Mordecai when her father and mother died (2:5-7)

Retelling Esther's story: What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Esther reflects: As I look back on my life I marvel that I survived. Tonight I am thankful for the Festival of Purim that celebrates the victory of my people, the Jews. I am proud of my uncle Mordecai who worked with me to save my people from being killed by an army led by Haman. I am content that as the Queen I was able to persuade my husband, the King, to listen to my warning. He took me seriously, believed Haman was guilty and ordered him to be killed.

I am proud that Mordecai is now second in rank to the king. (2:17-18).

I shut my eyes and let memories flood my mind. I think of my early days when I was adopted by Mordecai. We were one of the Jewish families that came to live in Susa (2:5). Many stories of King Ahasuerus' extravagant parties were told in the market place. Then came the shocking news that Queen Vashti had defied the King's orders to dance at a banquet (1:12). As a result the Queen was banished from the kingdom. A ripple of fear spread through the city as we heard that the King was angry and believed that Queen Vashti's disobedience would encourage wives to disobey their husbands. (1:11-20). I remember how the King sent letters to all the provinces that every man should be master in his own home (1:21-22). It was a confusing time.

Not long after that the King ordered all beautiful young women in the kingdom to be brought into the palace. I was among them. Many of us were frightened wondering what was before us. We were housed in the King's harem. Each night a few of us would be taken before a Royal banquet. The night when it was my turn the eunuchs helped me dress. I was terrified. A few of the girls who had become my friends gave me courage. That evening is still etched in my mind. Before the night ended we got the news that the King had chosen me to be his Queen. I was filled with excitement. It was like a dream. Me. Queen Esther. Living in the Palace after I married the King! I would have power. I would be obeyed. My uncle Mordecai brought me back to reality. He reminded me that I would be a Jew in a Persian court and would be at risk. He advised me to keep my Jewish identity a secret so that I would be safe (2:20-21). I heeded his advice as I got used to my status and role as Queen.

PAUSE. Reflect. Queen Vashti defies the King and loses her power.

Esther rises from powerlessness to power by playing by the rules.

Does gender influence the use or abuse of power?

Life began to change when Mordecai overheard two men plotting to kill the King. Thankfully he passed on the information to me so that I could alert the King. The King was saved thanks to Mordecai. His name was recorded in the Palace as a person who had gained favour with the King (2:19-23). Mordecai continued to look out for me. He kept me informed of events in the city. The day came when he informed me that the King had promoted Haman to a seat above all other officials (3:1). Haman was a powerful man. People honoured and bowed before him by order of the King.

Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, who had heard that he was a Jew. Haman decided to kill all Jews and labelled them as "Mordecai's people" (3:1-6).

I am tired and should retire to my chamber. But the events that followed Haman's rise to power occupy my thoughts. It was a dreadful time. He manipulated the King to give him the authority to destroy my people. Mordecai came to me and insisted that I use my position as Queen to save our people. I spent hours trying to devise a plan that would work. Mordecai's words that I was perhaps Queen for such a time as this challenged me (4:14). I made a decision. I would go before the King and plead for my people. If I perish, I perish (4:15-16). I ordered a fast to be held among my people before I went before the King.

My strategy was to plan two banquets to which I would invite the King and Haman. We would dine alone. I would reveal my Jewish identity to the King (5:1-4). My strategy worked. After the meal I invited them to a second meal. Haman was delighted to receive the second invitation. He left without realising that I was a Jew.

A strange event occurred that night. I heard about it later. The King had had a restless night. He had asked for the Book of Records to be read to him. He had then realised that he had not honoured Mordecai for saving his life (6:1-4). It transpired that Haman had entered the Palace to seek permission to carry out his plan to kill Mordecai and the Jews. Without revealing any identity, the King ordered Haman to honour a certain person by placing robes on him. Haman was then to take him on horseback through the city. When Haman finally realised that the man being honoured was Mordecai he was humiliated (ch. 6). He hurried home and confided in his wife Zeresh who gave him advice on how to punish Mordecai.

My second banquet for the King and Haman took place. The King asked me what it was that I wanted to ask of him. It was the opening that I needed. I appealed to his emotions and I pleaded for the life of my people. That they be spared from Haman's plans to kill every man, woman and child (7:3). I can still picture the anger in the King's face and the fear in Haman's eyes. It had been a eunuch who was present who had pointed out that Haman had built a gallows from which to hang Mordecai. The King had then ordered Haman to be hanged on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai (ch.7).

PAUSE. Reflect on Esther's strategies to save her people.

Was she justified in using her influence with the King to have Haman killed?

How close are the dividing lines between influence, authority and power?

The lights have dimmed in the Palace. The Festival of Purim celebration is over. Mordecai has been honoured by the King. The Jews celebrated his leadership and his actions that saved them. Mordecai and I were honoured by the King. Together we gave

written authority for the Festival of Purim to be remembered and celebrated each year. It would be a celebration of the peace and security that we, as Jews, had won (chs. 9 and 10).

I rise to retire to my chamber and stop. I can hear the sound of weeping in the distance. The voices of children and women raised in fear. I wonder if my people are continuing to use the violence we had unleashed against Persians still in the city. As Queen I know that I am still at the height of my power. Should I intervene? I hesitate. It is time for my people who had been oppressed for so long to claim their victory at last. I will go to sleep now.

REFLECTION.

The use and abuse of power is a strong theme in the Book of Esther. Esther risked her position of power to save her people. Doing nothing was not an option. Staying silent was not acceptable. Saving only herself would have meant death to her people. The rise to power by those who are powerless can bring its own abusive uses.

Exercising power involves choice and risk. It can be a choice between good and evil; between right and wrong; between death and life.

At such a time as today when we are faced with choices that have implications for the survival of masses of people who remain powerless, how should we respond as people of God?

God of wisdom and power
empower me so that I may empower others.

Faith and Belief

Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

Texts: Luke 10: 38-42. Jesus visits the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus

John 11: 1-44. The death of Lazarus

The Gospel of Luke is dated around 85-90 CE. It is believed that the author of this Gospel was a Gentile Christian. The Gospel of John is dated around 80-90 CE. The author is anonymous. The name 'John' was attached to this Gospel by the church and is identified as being the apostle John.

The Gospel of Luke has a number of women present in the narrative. These two Gospels are the only ones that record Jesus' friendship with Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Jesus often visited the town of Bethany in his journeys. Jesus' final weeks of ministry prior to his death, took place in and around Bethany.

Who were Martha and Mary?

The home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus was located in Bethany, a town situated beyond Jordan. Jesus visited the home in Bethany twice. Luke and John are the only Gospels that record these two visits. It is probable that the family were known in the community. Martha was the owner of the house (Luke 10:38) and not Lazarus, which would have been unusual during this period in history. The two sisters were in their home when Jesus visited them. Lazarus was away.

In John's Gospel the death of Lazarus is central to the story. Martha is the dominant figure in this episode.

Retelling their story: What follows is a retelling based on the Biblical narrative. It is a composite of the episodes from the two Gospels. It is by reading into the silences around the events and the people in the text that this imagined reflection is written.

Martha reflects: *As I look back on the events that occurred before our friend Jesus was arrested I am glad that my sister Mary, my brother Lazarus and I were able to share special times with him. There was the time when he visited our home for a meal. Lazarus was away when we heard that Jesus was going through Bethany and that he would be coming to have table fellowship with us.*

Mary and I set about making preparations for a meal and tidying the house. Although Lazarus would be away, Mary and I were quite capable of hosting Jesus. As we talked while preparing the vegetables we wondered what our neighbours would think when they saw a man coming to visit us when our brother was away! We talked about the news that Jesus was now teaching his male followers about being disciples. We recalled hearing that he had sent seventy disciples to visit every town that he would be passing through. (Luke.10: 1-20). Many stories were told about his claim to be the Son of God. To us Jesus was friend and Teacher. I thought often about the demands of being a follower or a disciple. I tried to be realistic since women were often not noticed when we came to listen to Jesus' teaching.

The cooking was nearly finished when I heard Jesus at the door. I rushed to greet him. I led him into the room we used when we had visitors. I thought that Mary was finishing the cooking. I looked into the room and saw her waiting for Jesus. I was irritated that she left me to serve the meal while she sat at Jesus' feet listening to what he was saying. Of course I complained to Jesus! I wanted him to tell her to help me. (Luke.10:40). But he pointed out gently that Mary had chosen to sit and listen to him. He actually added that my sister had "chosen the better part". Well, I never! Did he not realise that there would have been no meal if I was also sitting and listening to him?

Mary reflects: I remember how impatient my sister Martha was when she saw me sitting with Jesus while she rushed around getting the meal ready. She was always the strong one in the family. She would organize our home, tell Lazarus what to do, and always find time to teach me. She was the anchor of our home. That night I didn't mean to deliberately discredit her. I had so many questions I wanted to ask Jesus. I had heard of some of the parables he was using when he taught his male disciples. I wanted to ask him to explain to me whether I could become a disciple too. It was good to be able to talk with him without any of the men being present.

PAUSE. REFLECT:

What aspects of discipleship do you see in the two sisters? How is the understanding of discipleship reflected in Christian communities today?

Martha reflects. Not long after that visit from Jesus tragedy struck in our home. Our dear brother Lazarus took ill. For days we tended to him. Friends brought us healing herbs and oils. Nothing seemed to work. Mary and I were desperate. We sent Jesus a message hoping that he would come to heal Lazarus. (John.11:3). Jesus never came. A

few days later Lazarus died. We wrapped his body in burial cloths and laid him in a cave with a large stone at the opening.

A few days later Jesus arrived with his disciples. I faced him angrily. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." (John 11:23). Jesus said to me, "Your brother will rise again." (John 11:23). My impatience with him must have shown when I said that I knew that my brother would rise again on the last day. (John. 11:24). His next words made me ashamed. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11: 25-26). I knelt down before him and said, "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (John. 11:27). I got up and ran to get my sister.

PAUSE. REFLECT: "I am the resurrection and the life." (John. 11: 25-26).

How do we understand these words when we think about the dying of someone we love?

What does this mean as we think about our own dying? Does it make a difference to how we live?

Mary reflects: I was in the house crying and mourning the death of my brother when Martha burst in saying that the Teacher was here and was asking for me. (John 11:28). Jesus was still outside our village as I ran to him. Some of the women who were mourning with me ran by my side. As I met him I fell to my knees and cried, "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died." (John. 11:32). As I continued to weep I saw the tears in Jesus' eyes as he too wept for his friend Lazarus. I led him to the cave where we had placed Lazarus. "Take away the stone," he said. Martha reminded him that Lazarus had been dead for days and that the smell of death would be unbearable. (John.11:37). Jesus reminded us that if we believed in him we would see God's glory. Someone moved the stone from the entrance to the cave. Jesus then prayed thanking God for hearing his prayer that would make all those present believe that God had sent him. (John.11:41-42). He then called Lazarus to come out. Our brother walked out of the cave, still wrapped in his burial cloths. "Unbind him and let him go," commanded Jesus (John.11: 44).

Our family was restored. Jesus walked away to a town named Ephram and stayed there with his disciples. (John 11:54).

REFLECTION

Martha and Mary not only believed in Jesus they had faith in him as the Son of God – the Messiah. This ancient story of the family in Bethany and their relationship with Jesus transcends centuries of re-telling to speak to us today. It draws us into understanding spirituality as a combination of faith and belief, of moments of quietness and times of action. It can be a combination that replaces doubt with certainty.

As science and knowledge expand in our time how does it affect our faith?

Are we challenged in our faith in God as Creator when we become aware of a universe that seems greater than the biblical record of creation?

As medical research continues to push the boundaries between life and death is our faith challenged?

God of life and faith
may I know your presence in my life as faith, not fear.

Faith and Crossing Boundaries

A Canaanite Woman

Text: Matthew 15: 21-28 - A Canaanite Woman

Mark 7: 24-30 - A Syrophenician Woman

Prior to the writing of the four Gospels, a tradition of storytelling preserved accounts of the life of Jesus and his teachings. Mark's Gospel is accepted by scholars as the first to be written. It is suggested that the writers of Matthew and Luke depended on the Markan account for part of their work. John's Gospel differs in many ways from the other three Gospels. However the aim of all four Gospel writers was not to create a historical biography of the life of Jesus. It was primarily to proclaim him as the Son of God and the risen Lord and Saviour.

Both stories record the same incident of a Greek woman looking for healing for her daughter and her encounter with Jesus. Mark's Gospel refers to her as the Syrophenician woman. Matthew's Gospel refers to her as the Canaanite woman. The city Tyre where the incident occurred was an ethnically mixed town. It consisted of urban and rural areas and reflected cultural, religious and economic diversity.

The difference in the records of the encounter is attributed to the objectives of the two writers.

Who was the Canaanite woman? She was nameless. She was identified by her racial background: Canaanite, Syrophenician. She was considered to be 'unclean' by the Jews because she was a Gentile. She was a mother whose daughter had a long-term mental illness. Since neither reading mentions a family it is safe to assume that she was a single mother. She is the central figure in the story.

Mark presents her as a Gentile woman who challenges Jesus to recognise his mission to those outside the Jewish faith. Matthew presents her as a courageous woman who referred to Jesus as the 'Son of David'. A term that was familiar in the history of Israel.

Retelling the Canaanite woman's story.

What follows is a composite of the two biblical narratives. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

The Canaanite woman reflects. *You ask me how my daughter was healed? Let me tell you. It was like every other day. My daughter tossed restlessly, half asleep. Her mental illness made her stay in bed rather than getting out of bed. I left the house silently and walked past little villages and farms that dotted the road. As I walked I thought of the reasons for this journey and why I was heading into the township of Tyre. I recalled the many times I had gone searching for healing for my daughter. The pain and sadness that followed each useless journey always brought tears to my eyes. But today I felt it was going to be different. Today I would find the miracle healer who was somewhere in the city. I would not let myself be rejected. I knew that I was a Gentile in the eyes of the Jews and was referred to as being unclean. I had heard that the healer was a Jew who was being called the Messiah by the Jews.*

I reached the city and began my search. Somewhere, in one of the rich Jewish homes the healer was staying. I asked questions. I listened to people talking and followed anyone who looked as if they could lead me to him. And then I found the house! I walked in unannounced. I saw the healer seated at the meal table. Without any hesitation I knelt respectfully and spoke to him. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." (Matt15:25). The disciples who were present urged him saying "Send her away for she keeps shouting after us." (Matt.15:23). Jesus' response offended me. He claimed "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt.15: 24), I was appalled. Did he not have any compassion for my request for the healing of my daughter? Was he truly a healer or just another arrogant man who would demean a woman, as was the custom?

There was no way I would let him get away with his reply. I looked him in his eyes and challenged him. He replied "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs"(Mk.7 27), "Sir even dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mk.7:28) I replied. I held my breath and waited. I had changed the insulting word "dogs" to mean household pets who were not chased away from under the meal table, but were permitted to feed on the scraps that fell from the family table. Jesus replied "Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish" (Matt 15:28). "You may go. The demon has left your daughter." (Mk. 7:29).

I turned and ran as fast as I could. Was my daughter truly healed? Words ran through my mind as I ran. 'Faith' – whose faith? The Jewish Healer's faith or my Gentile faith? I ran faster and entered my home. My daughter lay on her bed with joy in her eyes. Tears streamed down our faces. She was truly healed! We now had a future and new life. We never saw the Jewish Healer named Jesus again.

PAUSE and reflect:

How do you think those present at the encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus would have reacted?

Would this be regarded as an unacceptable intrusion?

REFLECTION:

The Canaanite woman was the outsider in the encounter with Jesus. She broke through the barriers between two races because her need was greater than the rules of society.. She met Jesus as an equal as she argued her case. Her tenacity led to Jesus' change in his attitude to Samaritans.

Who do we think of as outsiders in society today? Are they the migrants who drown as they search for refuge in faraway Europe? Women carrying infants and searching for food and water on the African and Asian Sub-continent? The face of a child on a TV screen who is a victim of abuse?

In a world with blurred borders does the outsider pass unseen on TV screens, the Internet and via social media? In a multi-religious country like ours do we sometimes struggle to find the right words to connect with the outsider so as not to cause offense?

Jesus recognized the boundaries between him and the Canaanite woman – the outsider. She found the words to challenge these boundaries. He recognized that his mission was to both Jews and those who were outside the Jewish faith.

Can faith help us to cross boundaries between race, gender and social differences?

*Give me courage, God,
to cross the boundaries that divide and fragment communities.*

Faith and Doubt

The Samaritan Woman

Text: The Gospel of John 4: 1-41

Jesus had been travelling within Judea, when he travelled into Samaria. The enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was on going. Central to the enmity was a dispute relating to the cultic shrine of the Samaritans and the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The shrine was destroyed by Jewish soldiers in 128 BC. The encounter between Jesus and the woman from Sychar in Samaria occurs while the dispute was still on going. This encounter is recorded only in John's Gospel.

Who was the Samaritan woman?

She is identified by her ethnic origins and has no name. She is the central figure in the encounter. Her conversation with Jesus crosses social, cultural and religious boundaries. Her marginalisation within her own community resulted from her marital status. She was believed to have had five husbands. Being in a minority on all fronts: race, gender, sexuality and religion, Jesus' initial offer of the water of life may have prompted her decision to believe in him. Her ability to engage in a long dialogue, to ask insightful questions and finally to be the witness who brought her community to faith in Jesus places her as an equal among the disciples and Mary Magdalene

Retelling the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

The Samaritan woman reflects: *I checked the water jars. They needed re-filling so I picked up an empty jar and left for the well. The noon day sun was scorching but I was used to this daily trek. As Jacob's Well came into sight I stopped. A stranger was seated by the well. I looked around and there was no one else in sight. I wondered if I should retreat and come back later. Would the man attack me? It was a long way back and I would need to walk back again. I decided to take a chance and walked slowly towards the well even though I was full of doubts.*

I froze when the man spoke to me and asked for a drink of water. As I looked closer I realised that he was a Jew and that he shouldn't have been asking me – a Samaritan

woman - for a drink. It was not acceptable to both our cultures. I picked up courage and asked him how he expected to draw water when he didn't have a bucket. My mind was racing with questions and suspicions. He replied that I didn't know what God wanted to give me. That I didn't know who he was and that he could give me the water that gives life.

I was curious. I needed to know what he was talking about. So I questioned him again. How could he possibly draw life giving water from this well which we had used for years. It was the well that our ancestor Jacob had dug for everyone to use. I couldn't resist asking if he thought that he was greater than Jacob! He didn't answer my question. Instead he went on about the living water that he could give me that would never make me thirsty again. That this water would give me life that was eternal. I decided that I should ask for this water so that I wouldn't need to walk to the well everyday.

I was embarrassed when he replied by asking me to go and bring my husband. I looked away and mumbled that I didn't have a husband. I was amazed when he responded that he knew that I had five husbands and that the man I was living with now was not my husband. How did he know this, I thought. I had to change the subject because I didn't want him to probe deeper into my personal life. So I talked about how my ancestors had worshipped at Mount Gerizim which we could see from where we stood, and didn't the Jews worship in Jerusalem?

Again he didn't answer my question. Instead he continued to share with me things I had never heard of before. He talked of God as Father and about the Spirit that would guide true worshippers. I was mesmerized. I began to think that perhaps this man was the Messiah, the one who would be called the Christ. His next words would stay with me forever. He said "I am the one and I am speaking to you now".

Our conversation was interrupted when a few of his followers returned. They looked suspiciously at both of us. They must have had doubts as to why I was alone with a man. I left my jar at the well and ran. I was excited and decided to share my encounter with anyone in my town who would listen. I was so happy when I persuaded many of them to come back with me to meet the man who was the Messiah.

When we returned we saw him in deep conversation with the men who had brought him food. We joined them and listened to what he was saying. Many of the towns people believed him. Some invited him to stay longer. He did. He stayed two days in the town. Many more Samaritan people believed in him. Why was I not surprised when some said to me that they had faith in Jesus, not because of what I had said but

because they had heard him for themselves. It made me happy when I heard some of them refer to Jesus as the Saviour of the World.

And to think that all this happened because I went to Jacob's Well for water!

PAUSE and reflect.

The Samaritan woman didn't hesitate to ask hard questions. Do we feel intimidated by conversations on theology and Bible texts that we may not understand?

What intentions colour our conversations with those who don't belong to a church community or who live in the 'real' world?

REFLECTIONS:

Jesus initiated the conversation with the Gentile woman. As their conversation developed he offered her 'living water' (4:10). His comments relating to her sexual identity – a woman with no husband and multiple relationships – did not deter him. That she was considered to be ethically impure was not an issue. Jesus continues to reveal his true identity to her.

It is the longest conversation with a woman recorded in the Gospels. Jesus reveals that "the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth"(4:23). "God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth," The woman replies: "I know that Messiah is coming."(4:25). Jesus responds "I am he. The one who is speaking to you."

Jesus crossed boundaries between him and the Samaritan woman. She believed that he was the Messiah and ran to witness to the news to the people in Sychar. The Samaritan woman moved out of her comfort zone to witness to Jesus. She moved from doubt, to questioning, to faith.

Is it easy to talk about faith today?

Is it necessary for us to step outside our comfort zones to bridge the boundaries that separate church and secular society?

Living God,
fill my life with 'living water' when I am confused and fearful.

Belief and Memory

Mary of Bethany.

Texts: John 12: 1-8; Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; Luke 7: 36-50

The four Gospels in the New Testament record the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel of John differs in many ways from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke which are known as the Synoptic Gospels. There are similarities and differences in events that were recorded. The texts relating to the anointing of Jesus by a woman is such an example.

Mark 14: 3-9 doesn't give the woman a name.

Matthew 26: 6 –13 doesn't give the woman a name.

Luke 7: 36-50 identifies her as a sinful woman.

John 12: 1- 8 identifies her as Mary of Bethany.

Who was Mary of Bethany?

John is the only Gospel that identifies her as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary is present with her sister Martha when Jesus visited their home. She is also present at the death of her brother Lazarus. All four writers record the anointing of Jesus as taking place in Bethany. In later years some traditions named Mary Magdalene, who was also named a sinner, as the woman who anointed Jesus. There is no evidence for this assumption.

Retelling the story of Mary of Bethany: What follows is a retelling based on the Biblical narrative. It is a composite rendering based on the accounts in all four Gospels. It is by reading into the silences around events and people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Mary reflects: There was much chatter in Bethany about our friend Jesus. Some speak of him as a prophet, others as a miracle worker and a few as a teacher. For my sister Martha, my brother Lazarus and myself Jesus was our friend who visited us whenever he travelled through Bethany. We often had table fellowship with him and talked about the many events that were taking place. In recent weeks we became aware of rumours that the leaders in the Temple were planning to arrest him.

It was six days before our Passover when I heard that Jesus was visiting the home of Simon the Pharisee (John.12:1-8). Something prompted me to act. I bought a very expensive alabaster jar filled with fragrant oil and ran to Simon's house. Without a thought I rushed in and stood behind Jesus who was seated at the table with the disciples and some other men. With no hesitation I broke the alabaster jar and poured the oil on Jesus' head. Then I knelt at his feet and let my tears mingle with the oil that had washed over his feet. I had no towel to dry his feet so I used my long hair to dry them. It was a premonition that drove me to act no matter what it would cost me. All I could think of was that I wanted to anoint him before he was arrested and maybe killed.

As I rose the stunned silence in the room was broken. I was accused of being extravagant and thoughtless in wasting such expensive oil. Someone said angrily that it would have been better for me to have sold the alabaster jar and given the money to the poor. The most hurtful word that was thrown at me was that I was a sinful woman who should not have been permitted to use my hair to wipe Jesus' feet. Only prostitutes carried out such acts on men.

I looked into Jesus' eyes. There was no anger or condemnation in them. Instead he spoke to the men at the table. "Simon I have something to say to you." Since the men were still angry, Jesus related a parable about 2 debtors who could not pay their debts. But the creditor cancelled their debt. Jesus asked the question "Which of them would love him more?" (Lk.7:41-42). Simon replied that it would have been the man who had the greater debt cancelled. Jesus said "You always have the poor with you, but will not always have me." (Matt. 26:11).

Jesus then looked at me and said to Simon: "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment." (Lk.7: 44-46). He said he recognized that what I did was not a wasteful act. I was forgiven because it was an act of love. That my sins were forgiven. He then said: "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her". (Matt: 26:13).

I needed to get home. As I hurried away I wondered what Jesus meant when he said that what I had done would be remembered in memory of me.

PAUSE and reflect:

How would you react if you were criticized for something you did with love? Are there times when you acted despite being advised against such an action?

REFLECTION

Why did Jesus commit the actions of Mary from Bethany for remembrance in the future. Her motives were not coloured by religious, social or economic considerations. It was an act of love that anticipated the death and burial of Jesus.

How would this story be recalled or understood today? Perhaps:

- Once a year at Lent her story would be read in a church. A sermon might be preached.
- An economist may refer to Jesus' words about the poor to write an article on challenges relating to sharing resources and the distribution of wealth.
- A newspaper editor would ask a reporter why he wrote such an insignificant story. It would perhaps be placed in a small column inside a newspaper – if published at all.
- A politician may be tempted to claim the news item as fake news, No creditors would write off 2 debts when there is uncertainty in the money markets.
- Social media would go viral with “unnamed sex worker dares to break social and cultural norms” It would gather momentum across the world with questions such as ‘Who was she?’

Luke's narrative reads that Jesus forgave the woman her sins. There is no indication as to the identity of the woman. What were her sins? Did she love Jesus before Jesus forgave her? Is love the natural outcome to being forgiven?

An act of love and forgiveness was recorded for future generations to read. It found its way into the biblical record as one that would be remembered in memory of Mary of Bethany, where ever the good news was heard.

How often do we hear her story in our churches?

Has she been lost in the memory of the Christian story?

*Thank you God
for making me who I am, and loving me just as I am.*

Identity and Faith

MARY MAGDALENE

Texts: Mark 15:40,47; 16:1-9. Matthew: 27:56,61; 28:1-20;

Luke: 8:1-3; 24:10; John: 19:25; 20:1; 20:11-18.

Mary Magdalene lived in Magdala which was known to be a notorious fishing village that was destroyed about 75 CE. The name “Magdalene” is believed to be derived from “Magdala”. A number of women named Mary are mentioned in the Gospels. By attaching the word ‘Magdalene’ to her name, her identity was set apart from the other Marys. Mary Magdalene is the only woman disciple of Jesus mentioned in all four Gospels

Who was Mary Magdalene?

The Gospel of Luke refers to her as a woman from whom seven demons had come out. (Luke 8:1-3). The text is not clear as to whether Jesus was responsible for the expulsion of the ‘demons’. From this point on she became a follower of Jesus and is mentioned as one of a small group of women who provided resources for the disciples and Jesus as they travelled through Galilee (Mk 15:41). She is mentioned by all four Gospel writers as one of the women who were present at Jesus crucifixion. She was also the first at the empty tomb where he was buried and the first to meet and talk with the risen Jesus.

There has been some confusion relating to an assumption that Mary of Bethany mentioned in John’s Gospel, the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus mentioned in Matthew and Mark, and the sinful woman who also anointed Jesus and mentioned in Luke was Mary Magdalene. It is possible that such an assumption arose from the oral traditions that passed on stories in the early church.

Retelling the story of Mary Magdalene.

What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is a composite rendering based on the records in all four Gospels. It is by reading into the silences around events and people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Mary Magdalene reflects: *The day I left my village in Magdala and went into the city was the day that changed my life, Many people knew who I was and avoided me as I walked through the city streets. There was a belief that I was possessed by demons. Some shouted at me to keep away. Everyone avoided eye contact with me. As I walked I could see in the distance the man named Jesus with a group of people. I had heard of him and that he was a healer. I had nothing to lose. So I pushed my way through the crowd till I stood in front of him. He healed me from an ailment that had troubled me for a long time. It was a moment I wouldn't forget. Watching us were a group of women who then moved close to me. Later I learned their names. Susanna and Joanna were among the group who provided resources for Jesus and his followers as they travelled. (Luke. 8:3).*

From then on I joined the women and followed Jesus. I listened to his teachings. I marveled at the miracles he performed. Most importantly I believed the good news of the Kingdom of God that Jesus talked about. I was aware of the rumors that the leaders in the Temple in Jerusalem were gathering information to build a case against Jesus. There were also Roman soldiers who were watching us to make sure we didn't create trouble in the city. None of this worried us as we followed him. The most precious moments for me were when he taught me just the way I had heard him teaching the male disciples. To me he was my teacher and my closest friend.

My fears for his safety began to increase. There was something different about the day he entered Jerusalem. Yet he continued to teach while people gathered to hear him. It was during the celebration of the Passover Festival that we noticed a change coming over him. (John.13:1). He warned us repeatedly that his death was near. Then came the night when Jesus and his male disciples gathered in an upstairs room to celebrate the Passover meal. He had washed the feet of the disciples before sitting at the table and breaking bread with them. He had talked of the bread and the wine as his broken body given to save the world. He had then talked of the betrayal that would soon occur and named Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, who was one of the disciples, who would betray him that night.(John: 13: 21-30). I couldn't believe such news. How could a disciple betray his Master? Something wasn't right.

The rest of the night became a blur to me. Jesus left to pray at the Mount of Olives. He took Peter, James and John with him. (Mk: 14:33). We heard then that it was here that Judas had come with the Roman soldiers to arrest him. Fear was spreading through the city as word got out that soldiers had arrested Jesus. We were scared and hung back supporting each other as women do at such times. As the night wore on news came that Pilate had condemned Jesus to be crucified. We felt helpless. Our tears flowed as

we clung to each other and prayed. As Jesus was brought carrying the cross on to which he would be nailed some of us wailed. Some called to him in love. Some jeered and called him names. I will never forget the pain and the love I saw in his eyes as he looked at us. As the soldiers nailed him to the cross he looked down at us. Mary, his mother, her sister Mary, a disciple and I stood by the cross. Helplessly and in agony ourselves we watched him die. As we walked away when his body was brought down from the cross, I asked myself: Where was God? Why didn't God save him? Would a loving Father let a Son die in such agony?

PAUSE and reflect:

In times when you are fearful and anxious, to whom do you turn?

Does God seem distant or unapproachable at such times?

In silence we returned to the room where the disciples had gathered. No one was talking. We felt abandoned and afraid. I remember wondering if this was really the end. We were alone now. I couldn't sleep during the night that followed. As the day dawned I crept out of the house and moving like a shadow I found my way to the tomb where I knew Jesus had been laid. As I drew near I could see that the stone to the entrance of the tomb had been rolled away. It couldn't be. Had someone stolen his body? I couldn't see anyone around so I ran back to the house where Simon Peter and the others were still gathered. Breathlessly I cried "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have laid him." (John 20:2). Peter and another disciple ran ahead of us as we went back to the tomb. They looked into the tomb and found the linen wrappings folded and lying there. (John. 20:1-10). Not knowing what we should do next, the disciples returned to the house. I couldn't go back with them. My grief was too deep. I sat by the empty tomb and continued to weep. Something prompted me to look again inside the tomb. There were two angels who asked me why I was weeping. It didn't occur to me that this was a strange conversation. But I replied that someone had taken away my Lord. (John. 20:11-13). Then I turned around. A man was standing before me. I thought it was the gardener and asked him to tell me where he had taken the body of my Lord. Where had he been laid?

I waited breathlessly for his answer. Instead I heard a familiar voice say "Mary!" I turned. All I could say was "Rabboni!" as I reached out to touch him. He stopped me and said "Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and say to them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:14-18).

I ran back to the disciples with my heart overflowing with joy. I burst into the room and shouted "I have seen the Lord!" They looked at me with disbelief. But I knew I had seen and talked with my Lord. He was alive!

PAUSE and reflect:

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb to mourn the dead. She left as the first person to see and speak with the risen Christ.

What emotions surface when unexpected events occur in a day?

REFLECTION

Why has Mary Magdalene disappeared from the New Testament after she played such a significant role in the Four Gospels? Did the early Christian communities revert back to traditional roles for women? Mary Magdalene's voice became silent. She remained the repentant sinner, the prostitute and the adulteress. In the 6th century Pope Gregory the Great declared her to be a Saint for repentant sinners. She was portrayed by great painters as the sinful woman. In recent years she has been written into fiction and memorialized in a musical. She remains the sinful woman attired in red.

In the 20th century fragments of papyri written in Greek were discovered in Egypt. Among them was the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Apocryphon of John and the Acts of Peter. Six pages of the Gospel of Mary Magdalene are lost. What is left of this Gospel records the risen Christ teaching the disciples and commissioning them to go out and preach. It records that after Jesus departs conflict takes place among the disciples. Mary tries to intervene. Peter and Andrew refuse to believe that Jesus would have entrusted a woman with his teachings. Levi comes to her defense. He challenges all of them to stop arguing and to go out and preach the gospel as the Saviour had commanded them.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene and fragments from the other Gospel writers are compiled and held in the Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt. Historians have dated these gospels as writings from the 2nd century CE.

Was Mary Magdalene a sinner, a disciple or an apostle?

What does her story and witness say to us beyond the Easter story?

Living God, may I know your presence in the ordinary times of my life that I may share the wonder of knowing you as my God.

Suggested Readings

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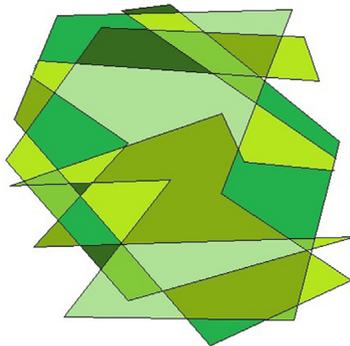
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Ranjini Wickramaratne-Rebera

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From: Belief and Memory - Mary of Bethany.



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